

The Conversation That Broke Down

By Marquis Childs

THIS IS A signal from the closed world of the Kremlin in Moscow. It is sent by a responsible Western statesman long familiar at firsthand with the course of world affairs.

Several hours spent with Premier Aleksei Kosygin brought a sense of dismay and alarm. The propaganda intention was there, of course—the desire to spread the Kremlin line as widely as possible through the chancelleries of the West.

But with this discounted to the limit the impression was of a man searching almost desperately for a way out of an impossible box. Kosygin talked about the United States for virtually the entire time. Washington was ruining any hope for coexistence. The policy of the Johnson Administration would soon leave the Soviet Union with no alternative but to join the war in Viet-Nam in full force.

The attack was obviously part of the propaganda. But a major theme that seemed to come out of a genuine and deep-seated concern was the lack of communication between the two worlds. While he did not say it in so many words, the visitor brought away the impression that the private and personal exchange begun between Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy after the Cuban missile crisis and continued by President Johnson with Khrushchev and later with Kosygin had been suspended. A further impression was that Kosygin continued to hope for some overture from Washington, although hope had almost run out.

A REPORT based on this extended conversation is currently being circulated in Western capitals at the highest official level. What influence it will have is uncertain. But it does tend to confirm the basic fear of Allied statesmen—that communication between the two nuclear giants has been all but broken off.

This could be heard in the background at the recent fruitless NATO meeting in London. Certain of America's staunchest supporters had come to that meeting prepared to sound off against the ambiguity of American policy in Viet-Nam. They were dissuaded by a plea for patience and understanding.

The same concern is reflected in the

unease in the Labor party and to a degree among Conservatives as well in Britain. Prime Minister Harold Wilson is in for bad trouble as he tries to hold to the loyalty line. These are the facts of life that, when reported in this country, are taken by the President's more passionate champions, contemptuous of "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind," as a form of *lese majeste*.

The answer of the top men in the Johnson Administration to the plaint of the Kremlin is one often repeated. We have tried and tried, and there is no response. They cite the effort to get a conference going on Laos which was blocked by China and North Viet-Nam. A similar proposal on Cambodia, with the hope of having talks on the side over Viet-Nam, was also blocked. When Secretary of State Dean Rusk met Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in Vienna recently, mention of Viet-Nam from the American side met with polite disinterest.

SINCE THE formal proposals have come to nothing, so goes the comfortable assumption, Moscow must not be too concerned over the future of the war in Viet-Nam. A gloss of optimism that seems to foreign observers at times almost frivolous is put on this aspect of the conflict. At the level of the Kremlinologists the answer, given with far less optimism, is that nothing can be done about the Soviet Union until Viet-Nam is out of the way.

The optimistic gloss—customarily reinforced by the conviction that Russia and China are irrevocable enemies—does not take in all top policy-makers. There are those with access to full intelligence reports who see a grave threat in the not-too-distant future. Their reasoning is as follows: Because of the split in the Communist bloc Moscow will feel compelled to send more and more materiel into North Viet-Nam. Technicians and specialists will go with it. Then will come, as American bombing edges farther and farther toward Hanoi, a direct confrontation between the two great powers. After that anything can happen.

It may be too late. It may be the divisions are so deep that nothing can now be done. For Europeans this is a counsel of despair. They are beginning to argue the need for a dramatic new overture that would not rest on formal proposals. Such an overture might take the form of a high-level meeting. Without it the drift will continue, and there are worried individuals who can hear the sound of the falls.